

The Crusade of John Brown

George Mills

ISSN 0003-4827

No known copyright restrictions.

Recommended Citation

Mills, George. "The Crusade of John Brown." *The Annals of Iowa* 35 (1959), 101-112.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.7537>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

The Crusade of John Brown

By GEORGE MILLS

The dramatic career of John Brown, in which Iowa and a number of her citizens played important roles, came to an end one hundred years ago this year. High lights of the story are retold by George Mills, a reporter with the *Des Moines Register*, who has written widely on Iowa history and is the author of a biography of Frederick M. Hubbell, *The Little Man with the Long Shadow*.

SLAVES BROUGHT THROUGH IOWA

John Brown would probably shoot you down right now if you tried to lay a hostile hand upon him. He shot straight too. So did his men. Capturing "Old John Brown of Kansas," as he was known, would have yielded rich rewards in 1859. The governor of Missouri had put a price of \$3,000 on his head¹ (quite a sum of money 100 years ago), and President Buchanan in Washington added \$250 more. Nevertheless, he brought a wagon caravan clear across Iowa in February of that year without anyone forcibly contesting his passage.

Having seized 12 Negro slaves on a recent raid into Missouri, Brown was escorting them through Iowa to freedom in Canada. They represented a value of several thousand dollars to their owners. It really should not have been too hard to capture John Brown at this time. His whereabouts were no particular secret. The *Des Moines Citizen* and the *Des Moines Statesman* carried stories about this fierce foe of slavery being in the state. The New York *Tribune* reported that he would probably be seized by United States marshals.²

But anyone who got in the way of John Brown was in for a real battle. "We are far on our journey and ready to die in open field," he declared, at Grinnell, "we

¹ Kansas *House Journal*, 1859, p. 44.

² A special correspondent of the *Tribune*, James Redpath was one of his early associates in Kansas and brought out the first of a number of biographies. *The Public Life of Capt. John Brown*, Thayer and Eldridge, Boston, 1860.

can shoot 60 times a minute and even the women are practiced dead shots.”³

There were three white men in the party besides their leader, and three Negro men. The other eight were Negro women and children. Some of the men carrying arms rode watchfully around the wagons. Woe to anyone who tried to interfere with this Cavalry of Jehovah!

Redpath, in discussing Brown’s followers, said that he had never seen such a band of men. “They were not earnest, but earnestness incarnate.”⁴ The caravan followed one of the nation’s more famous “underground railroad” routes. The little force had come up from Kansas and crossed the Missouri river into Iowa at Nebraska City, Nebraska. The route led through Tabor in Mills county⁵ and on to Des Moines. As the party passed through the streets of Des Moines about noon on February 18th, Brown paused to talk with John Teesdale, editor of the *Citizen*⁶, who paid the cost of ferrying them across the Des Moines river.

One of the Negro women gave birth to a son, proudly naming the child John Brown. The beaming old man held the child on his lap part of the time as the wagons creaked eastward.

At Grinnell, the generous Senator J. B. Grinnell, founder of the town, opened his home to Brown, and later gave the following description of his guest:

He stood very erect for a man nearing sixty years, and wore a full long beard, almost white, with hair parted and standing up. . . . The chin was broad, lips compressed, the eye was keen, light gray, deep set and mild, only flashing in moments of excited action, or when crossed in debate.⁷

³ Josiah Bushnell Grinnell, *Men and Events of Forty Years*, D. Lothrop Company, Boston, 1891, p. 210.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁵ “Leaving that place on the 11th, stopping at Toole’s the night of the 12th, Lewis’s Mills the 13th, Porter’s Tavern, Grove City, the 14th, Dalmanutha, the 15th, at Murray’s, Aurora, on the 16th, Jordan’s on the 17th. . . .” wrote George B. Gill, original Iowa-born member of Brown’s band, in Richard J. Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, Funk & Wagnalls Company, London, 1894, pp. 225-6.

⁶ October 26, 1859.

⁷ Grinnell *op. cit.*, p. 211.

Grinnell's front parlor became a temporary arsenal of rifles, swords, pistols and ammunition. Many citizens became alarmed. "The town will be burned," said one. "Spies were about and the United States marshal could easily make an arrest."⁸

A town meeting was called to see and hear the notorious free state fighter. "I went to Kansas . . . to save a great state from slavery," he said. "I am not a man of blood, but when God sends me on an errand I don't wait for my enemies to choose the battle-ground, and if I ordered men shot it was because they had planned murder."⁹

Brown said his real purpose in raiding Missouri was to "keep the slaveholders away from Kansas, busy with their home affairs. They are learning that they have enough to do in Missouri without burning out and killing free state men in Kansas."¹⁰ Three ministers prayed for the safety of the travelers during the Sunday evening meeting. A collection taken up for them yielded \$26.50. And Grinnell housewives prepared a large quantity of bread, meat, cakes and pies for them to eat on the way.

Before the little band left the town Grinnell received a message from Sam Workman, a federal official at Iowa City:

. . . all who aid Brown are liable, and there will be an arrest or blood. Get the old Devil away to save trouble, for he will be taken, dead or alive.¹¹

Brown quietly observed that, ". . . we are ready to be taken."¹²

The caravan reached the Quaker settlements east of Iowa City three days later. The townspeople of the state capital, including Workman, knew that Brown was in the vicinity with a party of fugitive slaves. There was talk of organizing a force to march the fifteen miles to Springdale to capture them and collect the reward money for Brown. But the old man defied his enemies, and with

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 212-13.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

¹² *Ibid.*

one of his chief lieutenants brashly entered Iowa City for supplies and to consult with anti-slavery friends, one of whom was the prominent William Penn Clarke, the member of the Kansas national committee for Iowa. There was some hurried scurrying around before dawn as the two men were safely spirited back to the homes of friends near the old Pedee postoffice in Cedar County.¹³

The biggest problem was to get the slaves safely across the Mississippi river and into Chicago. Arrangements were finally completed to drop a railway box car off at nearby West Liberty. The Negroes were quickly placed in the car which was attached to the next eastbound train.

United States Marshal Laurel Summers formed a posse at Davenport to arrest Brown and seize the slaves. The federal officers walked through the cars when the train reached that city, but "no Negroes were found, and no suspicion was aroused by the freight car in the rear."¹⁴ The train soon chugged on out of Iowa with its secret cargo. At Chicago, Allen Pinkerton, the famous detective, took friendly charge of the slaves, forwarding them on safely to Canada.

THE GALLOWS

"God bless you, old man," said a Negro woman as she watched near the prison with a small child. "I wish I could help you, but I can't."¹⁵ A tiny tear showed in John Brown's eye as he moved past her toward the gallows. It was December 2, 1859, the day he was hanged.

The end had finally come for this bearded foe of Negro slavery. And a bitterly divided nation held its breath when he died at Charleston, Virginia a century ago.

¹³ See *History of Johnson County, Iowa*, Iowa City, 1883, pp. 468-74, for a detailed account of John Brown's last night in Iowa City.

¹⁴ Benjamin F. Gue, *History of Iowa*, The Century History Company, New York City, Vol. I, pp. 382-3. Gue, a young member of the state legislature in 1859 and later lieutenant governor, was another prominent Iowan strongly sympathetic to Brown's views on slavery. Thirty-five years later he told how he helped write two anonymous letters warning the Secretary of War of the impending raid on Harper's Ferry, hoping Brown would give up the hopeless scheme. See Vol. II, pp. 24-30.

¹⁵ Horace Greeley, *The American Conflict*, O. P. Case & Company, Chicago, 1864, Vol. I, p. 298.

Except for that one tear, John Brown went to his death with a "radiant countenance and the step of a conqueror."¹⁶ A week after being sentenced to hang by the State of Virginia, he wrote to his family:

I can trust God with . . . my death . . . to seal my testimony (for God and humanity) with my blood, will do vastly more toward advancing the cause I have earnestly endeavored to promote, than all I have done in my life before.¹⁷

Less than two years later, 100,000 Union soldiers marched into Virginia singing: "John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave but his soul is marching on."¹⁸

Brown probably had as fair a trial as could be provided under the circumstances. At times he was unable to stand in court because of wounds suffered in the final showdown fight at Harper's Ferry, but he offered no excuses. His courage commanded the admiration of even the southerners. "I am ready to face the music," he told the court. "I believe that to interfere as I have done, in behalf of His despised poor, was not wrong, but right." He added that if it was necessary for him to die in the cause of justice, "so let it be done." Nearing sixty years of age, he said that he was "too young to understand that God is any respecter of persons."¹⁹

The prisoner indignantly refused to allow a plea of insanity to be made in his behalf. The jury deliberated forty-five minutes before returning a verdict of "guilty of treason, and of conspiring and advising with slaves and others to rebel, and of murder in the first degree."

The writer of one of the many letters John Brown received in his last days asked if she might come and nurse his wounds. He declined with thanks, but answered that he was concerned at leaving a wife, three daughters and two widowed daughters-in-law. He asked

¹⁶ Redpath, *op. cit.*, p. 396.

¹⁷ Nov. 8. Sanborn, F. B., ed., *Life and Letters of John Brown*, Torch Press, Cedar Rapids, 1910, p. 586.

¹⁸ For origins of this famed tune see Ernest K. Emurian, *Living Stories of Favorite Songs*, W. A. Wilde, 1958, p. 95. James Ford Rhodes *History of the United States, 1854-1860*. The Macmillan Company, New York, 1928. Vol. II, p. 372.

¹⁹ Hinton, *op. cit.*, p. 353.

if she would not as soon contribute fifty cents a year for the relief of these very poorly and deeply afflicted persons, and induce others to give a like amount.²⁰ Fifty cents purchased much more then than it would today.

During those forty-two days in prison, Brown spurned ministers who would not agree that Christianity and slavery were incompatible. He said such persons were not ministers at all. "Of course I respect you as a gentleman," he told the Rev. James H. March of the M.E. Church, "but it is as a heathen gentleman."²¹

The last letters of the condemned man to his wife and children are touchingly cheerful and calm, asking God to comfort all your hearts, and soon wipe away all the tears from your eyes. I cannot remember a night so dark as to have hindered the coming day, nor a storm so furious or dreadful as to prevent the return of warm sunshine and a cloudless sky. But, beloved ones, do remember . . . that in this world you have no abiding place. . . . To God and his infinite mercy I always commend you.²²

In Des Moines, Teesdale editorially asked that Brown not be hanged:

His death can add nothing to the security of slave property. The spectacle of that old snowy haired man driven to madness by the violence of his proslavery enemies . . . standing on the gallows, will deepen and widen the tide of public feeling that is now setting against (slavery).²³

Brown was permitted to talk with Edwin Coppoc, a Springdale, Iowa boy also sentenced to death as one of the Harper's Ferry raiders. He gave Coppoc a 25-cent piece saying he had no further use for the money.

Brown, when asked if he were afraid as he sat beside his coffin on the way to the scaffold, replied:

It has been a characteristic of me . . . not to suffer from physical fear. I have suffered a thousand times more from bashfulness than from fear.²⁴

²⁰ Letter to Mrs. Lydia Maria Child dated October 31 in Sanborn, *op. cit.*, p. 581.

²¹ Redpath, *op. cit.*, p. 383; Sanborn, *op. cit.*, p. 618.

²² Sanborn, *op. cit.*, p. 587.

²³ Des Moines *Citizen*, Nov. 9, 1859.

²⁴ Redpath, *op. cit.*, p. 399.

The state was in a considerable state of alarm. The Virginians half-expected a large force to come out of the woods and rescue Brown at the last minute. Cannon were trained on the prisoner to blow him to shreds at the least indication his northern friends might try to save this murderer and insurrectionist. Six companies of militia surrounded the wagon taking him to the gallows.

Brown walked quickly up the gallow steps. He told the sheriff that he was "ready at any time; but do not keep me needlessly waiting."²⁵ Nevertheless, he was kept standing several minutes while the poorly drilled troops maneuvered into proper position. When the trap was sprung, he struggled for a long time. The fall was too short to kill him quickly. He was finally pronounced dead after thirty-eight minutes.

The body of the martyr was taken to his mountain home near North Elba in Essex County, New York for burial. A neighboring colored family sang "Blow ye the Trumpet, Blow," a hymn that Brown had sung to his children. And the famed abolitionist orator, Wendell Phillips of Boston, spoke at the graveside, saying:

Fuller success than his heart ever dreamed God has granted him. He sleeps in the blessings of the crushed and the poor.²⁶

A few months later Victor Hugo, the celebrated French author in exile, wrote prophetically:

What the South slew . . . was not John Brown, but Slavery. . . . the American Union must be considered dissolved. Between the North and the South stands the gallows of Brown. . . .²⁷

Edwin Coppoc, one of the four Iowa men who participated in the raid on Harper's Ferry²⁸, also won the respect of his captors. "He asked no favors, made no complaints, but calmly accepted the consequences of his heroic

²⁵ Greeley, *op. cit.*, p. 298.

²⁶ *Iowa Citizen*, Jan. 3, 1860.

²⁷ Sanborn, *op. cit.*, p. 631.

²⁸ The others were Canadian born Steward Taylor, removed to West Liberty in 1853; Jeremiah G. Anderson from Indiana, a former resident of Des Moines, having studied for the ministry at Kossuth, both being killed in the battle; and Edwin's brother, Barclay Coppoc of Springdale, who escaped back to Iowa. *The Cedar County Historical Review*, Tipton, Iowa, August 1958, pp. 11-13.

effort to free the slaves. He faced his awful doom without a murmur."²⁹

His grandfather and uncle from Salem, Ohio, and Thomas Gwynn, a family friend in Cedar county, Iowa, went to Virginia to try to get Coppoc's death sentence commuted. The governor was willing, but the state legislature was not. Coppoc and a companion, John E. Cook, almost got away the night before their execution. They dug through a brick wall, but were seen by a guard and returned to their cells. Both men were hanged the next day, December 16, 1859.

The comment of Governor Samuel J. Kirkwood of Iowa probably reflected the feelings of many plain people in the Middle West toward the whole tragedy:

. . . Harper's Ferry . . . was an act of war—of war against brothers . . . , relieved to some extent of its guilt in the minds of many, by the fact that the blow was struck for freedom, and not for slavery . . . While the great mass of our people utterly condemn the act of John Brown, they feel and they express admiration and sympathy for the disinterestedness of purpose by which they believe he was governed, and for the unflinching courage and calm cheerfulness with which he met the consequences of his failure.³⁰

AFTERMATH IN MISSOURI

The December evening was dark and chill as six men (four of them Iowans) closed in on the big country home in Missouri. The wind whistled in the trees and sleet pounded the backs of the plodding men. As they pressed forward, all but one of them firmly believed in their hearts that they were truly on a mission of God. They had vowed to forcibly set free 28 slaves this night. Not even the sainted John Brown had ever rescued that many human beings from bondage at one time.

However, this bold night raid was doomed to failure. Instead of striking a blow against slavery, death waited in the house for the advancing men.

²⁹ Gue, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 11.

³⁰ Quoted in Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown, A Biography Fifty Years After*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1910, pp. 567-68.

One of the six men in the party was a traitor, leading his companions into a trap. He was William Quantrill, later to become a notorious rebel guerrilla during the Civil War. He perpetrated this bit of treachery in December, 1860, four months before the opening of the war.

Quantrill was without question one of the worst blackguards in American history. In this instance he joined a group of zealous young Free Staters in Kansas. Plans were made to go over into Missouri and seize the slaves of Morgan Walker who lived near Independence. But Quantrill disclosed the whole plan before the raid took place.

The other members of the little band never had a chance that dark night. Shotguns fired from ambush killed one Iowan outright. Another man from Iowa was wounded, and a third was killed later when he chose to stay with a wounded and dying comrade. The fourth Iowan apparently escaped unscathed.

John Brown had been dead a year when the Walker raid was staged. He was hanged in December 1859 following his capture at Harper's Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia). But this relatively insignificant raid in Missouri was a result of forces set into motion by John Brown and his men at Springdale, Iowa. They spent the winter of 1857-58 in Springdale after several bloody attacks upon slave-holders in Kansas. There they had fought with Old Testament fury to keep Kansas from becoming a slave state. Spellbound young men of Springdale heard Brown's fervent lieutenants describe this crusade. One observer wrote later:

The boys listened to the tales of horror of bleeding Kansas. They also read of them in the papers as they appeared in flaming headlines. Then and there, I have no doubt, the latent fires of their love for justice and humanity were kindled, and they determined to lend a helping hand to make Kansas a free state.³¹

A number of inspired Iowa youth from Springdale

³¹ From Letter of D. B. Morrison to Rev. J. J. Lutz, Springdale, Iowa, April 3, 1897. Ftn. William Elsey Connelley, *Quantrill and the Border Wars*, Torch Press, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1910, pp. 144-45. This is probably the most authentic and complete account of Quantrill's activities in Kansas and Missouri prior to the Civil War.

went to Kansas. One was 22-year-old Charles Ball who had attended Penn College at Oskaloosa for a time. Another the same age was Albert Southwick, a carpenter. A third was Edwin Morrison, also a carpenter, and only 20 years old. All three participated in the raid on Morgan Walker's farm. John Dean was a fourth Iowan who seems to have been somewhat older. He lived at Waukon after the Civil War. The only other man known to have taken part, besides the treacherous Quantrill, was Chalkley Lipsey, aged 21, from Ohio.

Quantrill had so few scruples that he would help slaves to escape, then collect a reward from their former masters by revealing where the slaves were hiding. The reaction of law-abiding Kansas citizens as a result of his many misdeeds made it too "hot" for him to remain in Kansas late in 1860, and Quantrill took the opportunity of joining the four Iowans on the Missouri slave-stealing expedition.

Morgan Walker was a well-to-do Missouri planter. He owned nearly 2,000 acres of land, a fine nine-room home, 28 slaves, and nearly 100 horses and mules. He also kept nearly \$2,000 in gold on hand. On the night of the raid, four men with shotguns lay hidden in the Walker house as the attackers crept up about 7 o'clock in the evening. Quantrill, Ball and Lipsey went into the house. Morrison stayed on the porch as a guard, and Dean and Southwick were somewhere closeby.

"We might as well state our business right away," Ball bluntly told the slave-owner in the house. "We are here to take your Negroes back to Kansas. We also will take your horses and mules and your money."³² Walker said that he didn't think any slaves should have to leave if they didn't want to. Quantrill said he would stay in the house with the Walkers while the others went to get the slaves. Ball and Lipsey joined Morrison on the porch where they formed an unsuspecting target in the flickering yellow light streaming from the door.

³² Anti-slavery men always contended that it was fair to take an owner's property because the Negroes were entitled to pay for their years of unpaid labor.

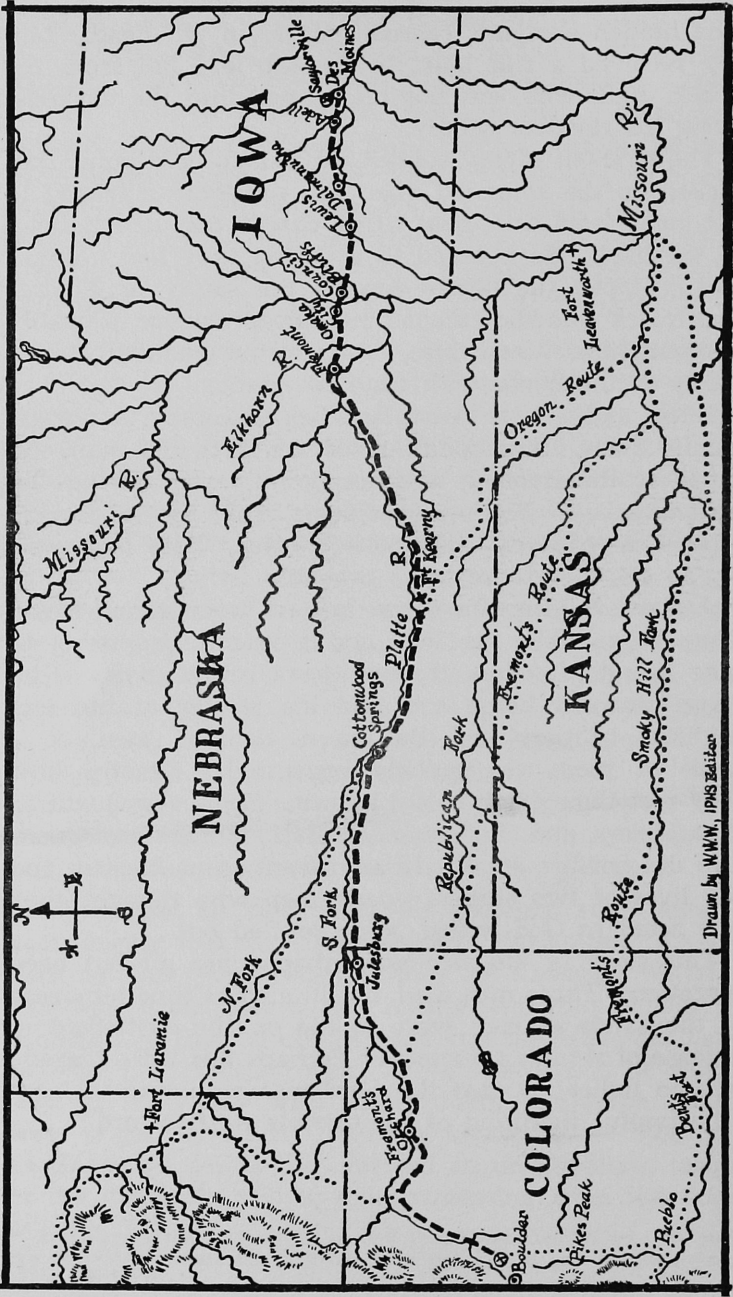
The hidden shotguns roared. Morrison fell dead. Lipsey received a full blast in the hip and fell from the porch. Ball, who was not hit, leaped into the darkness firing his revolver wildly.

The stricken Lipsey sobbed for Ball to help him. Ball picked up the wounded man, and somehow managed to get away from the house. One charge had struck Dean in the heel. He hobbled to a wagon they had brought and whipped the horses toward the safety of Kansas. Southwick who had escaped the murderous fire, probably fled with him. Meanwhile, the traitorous Quantrill stayed safely in the house with his new friends.

Bitter and sick at heart, Ball helped Lipsey to a wood a mile away. The condition of the wounded man, exposed to the freezing weather, grew worse during the next two days. Ball removed some of the shot and made a poultice of leaves, bark and hot water. They had nothing to eat, and Lipsey was probably dying.

A slave, hunting for a lost hog or horse, found them. They begged him for food and a wagon, promising to take him to freedom through Iowa into Canada. The slave returned home and told his master of the two fugitives. Lipsey and Ball were doomed men, as a force of men was quickly organized. Exactly how they met their death is not known. Some say Quantrill shot Lipsey, and Walker killed Ball. Others say Quantrill did not fire at all. In any event, guns barked, and the lives of two earnest young men who thought they had acted as God willed, were snuffed out.

This story of violence and intrigue has all but been forgotten. Three men died, but in a short time hundreds of thousands of men were to die on the battlefield in defense of similar principles. Perhaps this little tragedy was an indication that the Lord was preparing to loose "the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword."



Drawn by W.W.W. 1898 Edited

The Hinman party route to Colorado in 1863

Copyright of *Annals of Iowa* is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.